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ABSTRACT

A procedure for evaluating the oral language proficiency of limited English proficient (LEP) secondary school students is presented. The sample consisted of 101 twelfth grade students randomly selected from high schools in the Dade County Public Schools (Miami, Florida), including 72 LEP students. These students were or had been enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. The procedures used to determine oral fluency included a competency-based test of English language proficiency (the Basic English Skills Test) plus supplement, plus a staff-developed supplement, and teacher ratings. A questionnaire was administered to students to assess their attitude toward the oral interview test. A separate questionnaire was given to the testers, to assess their attitude toward the testing procedure and the training. The measures used covered a broad range of language tasks, were acceptable to students and testers, and were relatively easy to administer and score. Findings indicated that 45 LEP students had good-to-excellent oral proficiency; 27 students had poor-to-fair proficiency; and 22 of the Exited-ESOL students had good-to-excellent oral proficiency. Further research is needed to develop oral proficiency tests and rating scales which reflect different age levels and curriculum content. (PN)

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EVALUATION OF THE ENGLISH ORAL FLUENCY OF LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT TWELFTH GRADE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the English oral fluency of 101 public high school students. These students were or had been enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. The procedures used to determine oral fluency included a competency-based test of English language proficiency plus a staff-developed supplement, and teacher ratings. In addition, students and teachers who served as testers were also asked to report their attitudes toward the oral interview test. The procedures outlined in this report may provide a useful framework to determine student oral fluency in other school districts.

EVALUATION OF THE ENGLISH ORAL FLUENCY OF LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT TWELFTH GRADE STUDENTS

The purpose of this study is to present a procedure for evaluating the oral language proficiency of limited English proficient (LEP) secondary school students.

PERSPECTIVE

The evaluation of oral language proficiency of limited English proficiency (LEP) students in secondary schools has only recently received attention in the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) or bilingual education profession. While there are a number of standardized instruments and procedures for assessing oral proficiency in post-secondary institutions, e.g., the Test of Spoken English (ETS, 1982) the Foreign Service Institute test and rating scales etc., there is a limited number of such instruments for use in secondary schools. Of the major instruments available, norms for classifying students as to their level of oral proficiency in English either need further refinement or are not yet developed (Ramirez et al., 1982; David Hiple, ACTFL, April, 1984). At present, at least two states are reported to be seeking appropriate oral proficiency tests and norms for high school ESOL students, as well as for foreign language students. This surge of interest may be due to recent large influxes of refugees into this country, from Asia, Central and South America, Caribbean countries, and Mexico; and a concomitant recognition in the profession that the kind of fluency needed for successful communication for one age group may not be appropriate for another.

Although all students who lack proficiency in English face hardships in adjusting to a curriculum taught in English, the problem is more severe for those in the senior high school. These students must pass standardized written tests and fulfill basic course requirements, before they can graduate. For many students who arrive in this country at age sixteen, this means learning English and content subjects simultaneously, within two years. Some students may have to remain in high school well beyond age eighteen; others opt to attend adult education classes, and some just drop out of school.

Proficiency in a second or foreign language may be described as having a high degree of mastery of the three major components of language, syntax, vocabulary and sound system, so that effective communication can take place. The four fundamental skills by which communication is realized are listening (understanding), speaking, reading and writing. Proficiency in one of these skills does not necessarily entail proficiency in the other (Stansfield, 1981). It is possible for one to be able to have well-developed listening skills only, listening and speaking skills only, reading skills only, reading and writing skills only, or any combination of these. Thus any assessment of general language proficiency usually measures the student's performance in each of these skills.

Two types of tests are generally employed in examining oral language proficiency: "discrete point" and "integrative." Discrete point tests assemble units of language - e.g., phonemes, word endings, syntatic patterns, language functions, etc., and tests these individually. Integrative or global tests combine numerous units of language into a single task. Examples of integrative oral test items are answering questions, describing objects or pictures, story telling, or story retelling. Many language assessment researchers feel

that integrative tests have greater validity than discrete item tests, as more language units are sampled.

Integrative tests have two formats. In the first, structured communication, students respond to specific questions and demonstrate their ability to use language in a pragmatic way. In the second format, nonstructured communication, a conversation takes place between the examiner and the student, concerning a variety of topics and situations. Because non-structured oral proficiency tests generally involve extensive training of the examiner, and have a complex scoring system, the structured communication test appears to be the more practical instrument, if it contains a valid sample of the language tasks it is designed to assess.

This paper presents the procedures and findings of a study which assessed the English oral language proficiency of twelfth grade LEP students who were graduating from Dade County Public Schools (Miami, Florida) in June, 1984. The study was recently conducted by the district's Office of Educational Accountability (OEA) staff. The evaluation was requested by the School Board, after concern had been expressed regarding the ability of these students to communicate effectively in college or on the job. While the ultimate goal for LEP students is oral fluency equal to a native speaker of English, there are presently no state or district requirements in Florida for these students to demonstrate oral proficiency in order to graduate from high school. It is anticipated that the findings of the report, and the procedures followed, will be used in the long-range plan for establishing oral English proficiency criteria for future twelfth grade limited English proficient students, in the district. In addition, the results will form the basis for evaluating language proficiency of LEP students in all grades, and aid in establishing criteria for exiting these students from English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.

DATA SOURCE

The Dade County Public Schools student population in 1983-84 included 24,304 limited English proficient (LEP) students. While the majority of these students were concentrated at the elementary school level, 6,087 were enrolled in secondary schools, and 132 were in the twelfth grade. A sample of twelfth grade graduating seniors in ESOL and of students who had exited ESOL was drawn for this evaluation.

The sample consisted of 101 twelfth grade students randomly selected from the district's high schools. Seventy-two LEP students enrolled in ESOL classes participated in the oral proficiency testing. In addition, 29 students who had exited ESOL within the last twelve months, were also tested. Students reported as enrolled in exceptional education, failing twelfth grade or not graduating until January, 1985 were not included in the study.

The instrument used to evaluate the oral proficiency of the LEP students was the Basic English Skills Test (B.E.S.T.), (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982) Plus Supplement. Four oral language proficiency instruments were field-tested by OEA staff; the B.E.S.T. was selected for its ease of administration and scoring, as well as its ability to discriminate different ranges of oral proficiency. The B.E.S.T. is a competency-based test of English language proficiency which uses the individual structured oral interview method. It has been successfully used in determining proficiency levels of limited English speaking students, ages 16 and up. Developed for ESOL refugee populations,

the B.E.S.T. yields separate scores for listening comprehension, communication, pronunciation, fluency and sight-word reading. Minimal training (one to two days) is needed to administer the test; it is easy to score.

The content-of-sample on the B.E.S.T. is fairly limited to survival level English; therefore, an oral supplement was added to the Core section of the test to provide a more accurate sample of linguistic and communicative competence. This oral supplement was developed by OEA staff. It consists of two brief additional measures of oral proficiency: anecdote retelling and responses to school, social and job-related situations. Both the B.E.S.T. and Supplement were field-tested in three high schools; modifications of the Supplement were subsequently made.

An oral proficiency rating scale was developed by the authors for this evaluation to obtain an independent assessment of the student's oral language abilities. The scale defines oral language proficiency on a continuum of six levels of ability, ranging from "No Proficiency" through "Full, Native or Bilingual Proficiency." The scale encompasses four language categories: listening comprehension, communication, fluency and pronunciation. The highest value for each category is six; twenty-four is the highest possible score for the total rating scale. These ratings were obtained for LEP students from their ESOL teachers, and for Exited-ESOL students from their English teachers.

Not directly related to the questions of the study, but nonetheless of more than marginal importance, are 1) the attitude of the examinees toward the oral interview testing procedure, and 2) the comments and other feedback of the testers toward the training and test itself. A questionnaire was administered to students to assess their attitude toward the oral interview test. A separate questionnaire was given to the testers, to assess their attitude toward the testing procedure and the training. Oral testing was conducted by a team of ten experienced ESOL teachers, who were trained in the oral interview and scoring procedures by OEA staff.

RESULTS

The evaluation used a set of procedures to determine a criterion score on the B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement in order to classify students' oral proficiency into two groups, good-to-excellent and poor-to-fair.

The first step in establishing the criterion score for oral proficiency was to obtain an independent assessment of student oral language proficiency ratings from the students' ESOL and English teachers for both the LEP and Exited-ESOL students respectively. These ratings were used because they were found to be: (1) independent measures of oral proficiency, (2) significantly correlated with B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement test scores and (3) internally consistent. Since each of the language categories was found to be equally related to the total rating score; the sum of the four language category subscales was used in the analyses. The total possible score is 24 points.

A total oral language proficiency score is based on the sum of each of the four language skill category ratings. Ratings for each category are on a six-point scale; the highest value is six, the lowest is one. A rating of six indicates that the student is demonstrating native or bilingual proficiency in a skill category; a rating of one indicates an almost complete absence of proficiency in that skill. The highest total score obtainable is 24, which indicates native or bilingual proficiency in all language categories. A total

rating score of 16, by definition, corresponds to the minimum level of oral proficiency needed for effective communication and interaction in school, on the job or in social settings. The definition for this minimum proficiency level is summarized as follows:

> The student can follow multiple directions, and understands spoken English at nearly normal speed. Moderate repetition is necessary. Vocabulary permits expression of ideas in his/her own area of interest, expression of ideas in other areas is fair to good. He/she can respond with grammatically correct answers to what, who and when questions, and has moderate difficulty with how and why questions. The student's speech is moderately hesitant, but he/she can give several long explanations using past and progressive tenses correctly, to questions on familiar and unfamiliar situations. He/she can retell most of the key events of a standard newspaper item or a multi-paragraph essay. The student is readily understood. He/she has an accent. Pronunciation errors cause occasional misunderstanding, but his/her accent does not lead to misunderstanding.

The score corresponding to this definition was selected as the predictor, so that students could be classified into two groups: one with ratings at 16 or above, the other with ratings at 15 or below.

Based on the total oral proficiency rating score, LEP students were divided into two groups: high (a total rating of 16 or above) and low (total rating of 15 or below). Sixty-seven LEP students were rated by their ESOL teachers; of those, thirty-seven received a total rating score of 16 or above and thirty received a total rating score of 15 or below. Means and standard deviations were calculated on the total B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement for the High and Low Rating Proficiency Groups. The mean score for the high group was 82.5 with a standard deviation of 10.35; while the mean score for the low group was 65.8 and a standard deviation of 15.19. These values indicate that the oral proficiency rating predictor score of 16 is capable of separating students' oral test performance on the B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement into two distinct rating proficiency levels, and that students' scores on the B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement are relatively consistent with their oral language performance in their ESOL classes.

Application of the Multiple Classification Scheme (MCS) to Determine the Cutoff Score

To determine the cutoff score on the B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement that divides the LEP students into those whose oral language proficiency is good-to-excellent and those whose proficiency is only poor-to-fair, a statistical procedure, the multiple classification scheme (MCS) was used. This procedure, suggested by Briere and Hinofotis (1979) determines a cutoff score when two groups have overlapping scores. The formula for determining the cutoff point is:

$$MCS = \frac{(X_1 \cdot SD_2) + (X_2 \cdot SD_1)}{(SD_1 + SD_2)}$$

The values used in the formula were the means and standard deviations for the group rated high (total oral proficiency rating of 16 or above) and for the group rated low (total rating score of 15 or below).

In the case of the B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement Total Scores, the formula was calculated as follows:

$$MCS = \frac{(65.86 \times 10.35) + (82.51 \times 15.19)}{(15.19 + 10.35)}$$

$$MCS = 76$$

By this process, a score of 76 on the B.E.S.T. Plus Supplement was established as the cutoff between good-to-excellent and poor-to-fair oral proficiency.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the cutoff score of 76, the findings were as follows:

1. Forty-five of the LEP students tested were determined to have good-to-excellent oral proficiency. These students achieved the cutoff score of 76 or above on the oral test, with a mean score of 86. These students can converse through extended discourse, and respond to and ask questions with little hesitation, on a variety of topics related to school, home, job and social situations. They can retell the key events of a standard newspaper item or multi-paragraph essay.

2. Twenty-seven of the LEP students were determined to have poor-to-fair oral proficiency. These students scored below the cutoff score of 76; the mean score was 60. In general, these students can respond to and ask questions using simple structures, and discuss topics related to school, home, job and social situations with more frequent hesitations, at slightly beyond the survival level. They can retell some, or half of the key events presented in a standard newspaper item or multi-paragraph essay.

3. Twenty-two of the Exited-ESOL students tested, or those who had exited within the past year, had good-to-excellent oral proficiency. These students achieved the cutoff score of 76 or above on the oral test. Only seven Exited-ESOL students achieved a score below the cutoff. The mean for the students with good-to-excellent oral proficiency was quite good: 89, approximating the proficiency of native speakers who score 100 on the test. This high achievement supports the use of Exited-ESOL students as one of the criterion measures of oral fluency in this study.

Additional findings related to the testing procedures were as follows:

4. Fifty-eight ratings and 282 comments were obtained from students, with respect to their attitude toward the oral test. The formal oral English test, although a new experience for the students, was

perceived by them as positive and valuable. The students, as a whole, complimented the testers for putting them at ease, and reported that this type of test could help evaluate their progress in English.

5. Testers' (ESOL teachers) ratings of the training provided were high. The testers indicated that the training had increased their abilities in administering and scoring English oral proficiency measures. All felt that the test would be a valuable aid in assessing the oral proficiency of ESOL students.

Future evaluations of LEP students in ESOL programs should examine the factors which contribute significantly to students' acquisition of English in the most effective, rapid and cost-efficient way. Oral testing of individual students appears to be a viable method of determining oral English fluency, and should be one of the measures used.

Oral proficiency, although important, is only one measure of a student's abilities in a second language. A complete assessment of a student's total language abilities should address reading, writing and cultural dimensions as well. Other factors, such as grades, exposure/contact to the second language outside of school, motivation and teacher judgment, in the form of a "profile," should also be included in the long-range plan for establishing English proficiency criteria for 12th grade ESOL students.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

There is a need to develop and validate English oral proficiency instruments and criteria for LEP students in secondary schools. Districts with large populations of secondary school LEP students need English oral proficiency measures which a) adequately sample language tasks, b) provide norms, c) are economical, and d) are easy to administer, score and interpret. In addition, these measures must be capable of aiding the placement of students into the appropriate level of ESOL instruction, and of determining readiness to exit ESOL.

This paper has presented a procedure through which oral language skills of LEP twelfth grade students can be effectively assessed. The measures used covered a broad range of language tasks, were acceptable to students and testers, and were relatively easy to administer and score. Further research is needed to develop oral proficiency tests and rating scales which reflect different age levels and curriculum content. Nevertheless, the measures and procedures employed in this study may be useful to other school districts serving similar populations. The methodology discussed in this evaluation may also have implications for future studies of oral language proficiency.

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